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SUBJECT: FIRST ARAB WOMAN PARLIAMENTARIAN IN THE GULF:
LATIFA AL QA'oud

Classified By: DCM Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶11. (C) With the close of parliamentary candidate registration October 16, Latifa Al Qa'oud became the first woman member of an elected parliamentary body from any of the Arab Gulf states when no other candidates registered to run against her. Al Qa'oud is no newcomer to parliamentary politics, having run in the 2002 elections against independent Salafi Jasim Al Saeedi, losing to him in a second round run-off. This time Al Qa'oud, a director of human resources in the Ministry of Finance, changed her official address to a different district, she says, to give a woman a better opportunity to reach a seat in parliament. Online bloggers poked fun at her victory that appeared to be engineered by the government, while the reaction from women activists was mixed. Outspoken activist Ghada Jamsheer said she did not accept Al Qa'oud as the first woman MP because she was not elected fairly after two presumed competitors decided not to register as candidates. Other women activists were more positive, welcoming Al Qa'oud's new role in parliament and pointing out that other women will be inspired to excel. End Summary.

Previous Election Experience

¶12. (U) Latifa Al Qa'oud became the first female member of an elected parliamentary body from any of the Arab Gulf states when candidate registration closed October 16 and she remained the sole candidate in her district. Al Qa'oud is running in the sixth district of the Southern Governorate, the second least-populated of Bahrain's 40 districts with approximately 1,200 voters. Al Qa'oud ran in the 2002 elections for a seat in the lower house Council of Representatives (COR) in the Southern Governorate's first district. She came a close second to her opponent independent Salafi candidate Jasim Al Saeedi, pushing the election to a run-off after none of the candidates received over 50 percent of the votes. Al Qa'oud received over 45 percent of run-off votes cast in spite of conservative supporters in the district joining forces to defeat her.

¶13. (C) In a conversation with the DCM on November 1, Al Qa'oud recalled events of the 2002 run-off election. She claimed that up until early afternoon she was leading in the polls and remained hopeful of victory. She had been very active in her district, going door to door visiting constituents and talking with them personally. She claimed that 90 percent of the people she spoke with personally pledged they would give her their vote. Al Qa'oud then described a shift in the voting when buses began to arrive at

the polling station disgorging people she did not recognize. She made and received a flurry of calls to try to determine from where these voters had come. She confirmed that they were all on the voter lists and determined they were from areas of her district that were known for their conservative Islamic beliefs. She said that the voters had gathered at conservative mosques and that buses had picked them up to deliver them to the polling station. Al Qa'oud saw victory slip away.

Change to Hawar Islands District

¶4. (SBU) Following her 2002 defeat in the first district of the Southern Governorate and in the lead-up to the upcoming elections, Al Qa'oud began to consider a change in address enabling her to compete in another electoral district. She stated in an interview that she was not afraid to compete again against Salafis in her district, but saw a change to the sixth district offering her a better opportunity to reach a seat in parliament. Al Qa'oud, 50, unmarried, lives with her brother Director of Bahrain's Civil Aviation Authority Abdulrahman Al Qa'oud. Because he owns a home on one of the Hawar islands in the sixth district, she was permitted to change her legal address to Hawar. She said she was surprised when potential competitors current MP Mohamed Fayhan Al Dosari and Shamma' Al Dosari (a woman) decided not to register as candidates, but commented that an unopposed victory does not lessen the significance of the accomplishment.

¶5. (SBU) Al Qa'oud is the director of human resources in the Ministry of Finance. She received an MBA from the University

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of Nottingham in the UK. In an interview with English daily Bahrain Tribune, Al Qa'oud said, "I feel a special affinity to women's issues and I do think it is time women decision-makers had a voice in these matters. I hope other sisters in the elections will gain seats so we can strengthen each other's causes." She wears a black abaya (full body covering) in public, but said that this "is not a sign of backwardness but of a conservative outlook that tempers my modern approach to life."

Bloggers Poke Fun

¶6. (C) One blogger on Bahrain Online web site made fun of Al Qa'oud's ascension to parliament asking, "Who voted for her? Who is her constituency...birds and gazelles?" Another wrote that her success was set up by the government, and this is the reason the other two potential candidates in the sixth district did not register. "This is part of the 'show' that the King and the government like to put on." A third wrote that the COR is turning into another Shura Council now that the government is "appointing" representatives. In fact, senior government officials privately have boasted enthusiastically of Al Qa'oud's "election" to parliament, leaving the impression that the government did in fact orchestrate or at least support her efforts to represent Hawar.

Activists Have Mixed Reactions

¶7. (SBU) Reactions of women activists in the press were mixed. Women's rights advocate Ghada Jamsheer said she did not accept Al Qa'oud as the first woman MP because she did not gain the position fairly. Jamsheer claimed that Al Qa'oud was assured a seat to display to the world that Bahrain has a woman in parliament. "She is similar to women in the Shura Council, who are appointed by the government."

Awal Women's Society President Fawziya Al Khaja welcomed the new role Al Qa'oud will play in parliament, but said that she would have been happier if Al Qa'oud had been elected by contesting the vote with other candidates. She added that Al Qa'oud is known to be a dedicated worker, and that Awal supports her fully. Amnesty International representative Fawzia Rabea said, "Al Qa'oud's presence in the parliament will make a difference because it shows that women can do the same as men and there is no discrimination. It is inspiring to other women because they see that women can reach the top in any organization."

¶18. (C) In an October 25 conversation with PolOff, Jamsheer shared a more sinister interpretation of events leading to Al Qa'oud's current position. She said that Al Qa'oud gained much of her support in 2002 from the extended royal family since there is a high concentration of Al Khalifa family members living in the first district of the Southern Governorate. Her family is close to the royal family. Her competitor Jasim Al Saeedi was a relative unknown in 2002. However, during the past four years of parliament, the GOB began to see Al Saeedi as a valuable ally in furthering the Sunnis' hold on power and influence in Bahrain and against Shi'a encroachment. (Note: Although Jamsheer is Sunni, she is an outspoken member of the opposition and has embraced the Al Bandar report as truth and evidence of government collaboration to strengthen Sunni rule and obstruct Shi'a advances. Her outspoken nature brings much grief to family members including cousin Abdulrahman Jamsheer, first deputy speaker of the Shura Council. End note.)

¶19. (C) Jamsheer said that since the government now sees the value of keeping Al Saeedi in the parliament, it was individuals in the government who encouraged Al Qa'oud to change her district so as not to take support away from Al Saeedi. Jamsheer claims the government was behind the decision of the two other potential candidates in the sixth district not to run, even though they had publicly declared their intention to run against Al Qa'oud.

¶10. (C) Bahrain Transparency Society president Jasim Al Ajmi also expressed discomfort with Al Qa'oud's assured election win. In a conversation with PolOff on October 30, he said that the whole situation has a sense of being an artificial victory. "It just doesn't feel right. It doesn't give us the excitement to celebrate this as a victory for women because it appears so contrived."

Comment

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¶11. (C) The GOB has been trumpeting the achievements of Bahraini women of late, but in this case there is a slightly hollow ring to the praise. It may be the speed at which the GOB media wheels began to turn, calling attention to Al Qa'oud as the first woman parliamentarian in the Gulf the day after registration closed and more than a full month before the election itself, giving an even stronger feeling that the result had been engineered. Most viewers who are rooting for women have turned their attention on Wa'ad candidate and University of Bahrain professor Munira Fakhro, who is in a real political battle against eight other candidates, two of whom are quite popular in her district. A victory by Fakhro, who has also received the endorsement of leading Shi'a political society Al Wifaq, would be a real victory for women and would take attention away from the perception of government intervention in Al Qa'oud's win. Multiple sources tell us there will be ten women in parliament, divided between the elected COR and appointed Shura Council, up from six in the current Shura Council. Whatever the route, women's participation in the Bahraini parliament is growing.

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